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On Some Infrequent Features in Voltaire's Letters: The Progressive and Singular *you was/were*

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1. Introduction

The aim of the present study is to discover how François-Marie Arouet (1694-1778), known as Voltaire, a French author, essayist, philosopher, dealt with the two linguistic features, the progressive construction and singular *you was/were*, both of which went through change in the eighteenth century. 105 English letters written by Voltaire were employed to trace his usage of the English language. Before the discussion of these two linguistic features, some details about his crossing across the Channel are outlined in the next section, after which, description of the materials used in this study then follows.

2. Voltaire's visit to England

Numerous works by Ballantyne (1919), Gooch (1959a, 1959b, 1959c) and many others study Voltaire's visit to England in terms of the development of his literary taste, philosophy and ideas on the Continent. However, his stay in England is one of his major life events which should never been ignored also in the discussion of the relation of Voltaire and his English. Well-known details of the story regarding why Voltaire ended up visiting England are summarised in Wilson-Jones (1962: 121):

- Voltaire's acquaintance with Lord Bolingbroke in the early 1720's
- his plan for a visit to England several years later
- his quarrel with the Chevalier de Rohan-Chabot leading to imprisonment in the Bastille
- his voluntary exile in England lasting from Jun 1726 to the winter of 1728 or the spring of 1729

Voltaire had a close relationship with the Tory exiles living in France, including Viscount Bolingbroke, and his French wife. These people had a great influence on developing Voltaire's interest in England.

As Cronk argues that Voltaire 'came to London on a business trip'

(2017: 30), his main motivation for visiting England was not just to go into exile from his homeland, but also to publish his poem *La Ligue* (later *La Henriade*). Wilson-Jones maintains that ‘it is clear that Voltaire was thinking of an English journey as early as three years before the crisis which led to his crossing the channel in 1726’ (1962: 122). His plan for a visit to England is documented in the letter to George I of October 6, 1725, in which Voltaire asks for a permission to visit London and the king’s patronage of *La Henriade*:

à Fontaineblau ce 6 octobre n. s. [1725]

Sire,

Il y a longtemps que je me regarde comme un des sujets de votre majesté. J’ose implorer sa protection pour un de mes ouvrages. C’est un poème épique dont le sujet est Henri quatre, le meilleur de nos rois. La ressemblance que le titre de père de ses peuples lui donne avec vous, m’autorise à m’adresser à votre majesté.

J’ai été forcé de parler de la politique de Rome, et des intrigues des moines. J’ai respecté la religion réformée; j’ai loué l’illustre Elisabeth D’Angleterre. J’ai parlé dans mon ouvrage avec liberté, et avec vérité. Vous êtes sire le protecteur de l’une et de l’autre; et j’ose me flatter que vous m’acorderez votre royale protection pour faire imprimer dans vos états un ouvrage qui doit vous intéresser, puisqu’il est l’éloge de la vertu.

C’est pour apprendre à la mieux peindre que je cherche avec empressement l’honneur de venir à Londres vous présenter les profonds respects et la reconnaissance avec la quelle j’ai l’honneur d’être

Sire

de votre majesté

le très humble et très obéissant et très obligé serviteur

As for his acquisition of English, Cronk explains as follows:

He had little or no English and immediately began taking lessons from a young Quaker, who many years later published an account of how he taught Voltaire English using Addison's *Spectator*. (Cronk 2017: 31)

His numerous English letters since just a few months after his arrival on the island onwards, clearly suggest that he must have worked extra hard to be fluent in English.

3. Data

This study employs the data retrieved from Oxford University's Electronic Enlightenment (EE). EE describes itself in its own website as 'the most wide-ranging online collection of edited correspondence of the early modern period, linking people across Europe, the Americas and Asia from the early 17th to the mid-19th century,' and it contains 77,251 letters and documents and 10,178 correspondents as of Autumn 2017.

Over 16,000 letters written by Voltaire are found in EE. However, most of them are in French, and need to be excluded for the present study. In EE, it is possible to search for letters by content (i.e. word), language, writer, recipient, date, and location. This study searched for letters written by 'François Marie Arouet' in 'English'. As a result, 385 letters were found, many of which were translated from the original French letters into English by editors. Therefore, these debris had to be excluded manually. Eventually, 105 letters listed in Appendix were left and the base text for all these 105 letters are from *les Œuvres complètes de Voltaire* edited by Besterman (1975). The approximate total number of words in these 105 letters is 31,400. However, it is worth noting that code-switching often takes place, and there are even some letters in which just a few English words are found.

¹ All of Voltaire's letters used and quoted in this study come from Electronic Enlightenment (EE).

4. The progressive

4.1. Previous studies

Previous studies reveal that the progressive construction increases towards the nineteenth century. Hundt (2004: 58) found 6.9 instances of the progressive per 10,000 words in 1700-49 in the British English part of the ARCHER corpus, and 8.3 cases in 1750-99. In the letters of 1738-78 to and from Elizabeth Robinson Montagu (c. 1718-1800), ‘a learned and wealthy social hostess, cultural patron, and a core member of the Bluestocking circle’ (Sairio 2006: 167), the progressive is used in higher frequencies: for the in-letters, 8.4 per 10,000 words in the early eighteenth century, and 10.6 in the late eighteenth century; for the out-letters, 11.6 and 10.0 respectively (Sairio 2006: 176). Citing Núñez-Pertejo’s results (2004: 172-3) on the progressive in the letters in the 1640-1710 part of the Helsinki Corpus, namely 8.4 per 10,000 words, Sairio (2006: 176) assumes that the progressive is employed more often in letters than elsewhere.

4.2. Voltaire’s letters

As for Voltaire’s letters, he was reserved in employing the relatively new form at the time. Six examples of the progressive are found. Considering the total words of over 30,000 words with a large non-English vocabulary included, Voltaire’s use of the *be+ing* construction deviates from that of his English contemporaries. All of the progressive examples in Voltaire’s letters are as follows:

- (1) J *am entertaining* myself with this pleasant hope. (Letter of 26 October 1726 to Nicolas Claude Thieriot)
- (2) For my part having been in some measure educated in the house of the late Achilles de Harlay the oracle and the first president of our parliament, j should *be wanting* to my duty if j durst not trouble yr lordship, about it, and beg of the favour of waiting upon you before the book comes out. (Letter of 1 January 1728 to Edward Harley)
- (3) As I *am talking* to you about phisic, I must acquaint you that doctor Friend is a dying for having outphisiced himself: (Letter of 3 August 1728 to

Richard Towne)

- (4) J have not *been wanting* at the same time in mending my tragedy of Eriphile. (Letter of 9 July 1732 to Nicolas Claude Thieriot)
- (5) J could never obtain the privilege of saying in print, that light comes from the sun and stars, and *is* not *waiting* in the air for the sun's impulsion; (Letter of 25 November 1743 to Martin Folkes)
- (6) Yr letter expected me at Paris with yr book, and that book convey'd from Rotterdam to Berlin, was again sent to Paris by one of my friends, while j *was rambling* in the country, because at taht time, j was ready to make a journey to Paris. (Letter of 3 August 1751 to Richard Rolt)

While there seems to be no preference as to main or subordinate clause environments, it is not the case for subject type and tense. All but example (5) choose the first-person singular pronoun as their subject. Moreover, only the latest example demonstrates the past form. The preference over the first-person singular pronoun subject and the present tense harmonises well with a general purpose of letter-writing: a writer tells a recipient about their own current situation or ongoing activities.

5. Singular *you was/were*

5.1. Previous studies

The preterit *be* variation with the singular second-person pronoun is one of the linguistic forms which caught the eighteenth-century grammarians' attention most often. Robert Lowth, Joseph Priestly and other influential grammarian at the time, give a comment on this variation in their own grammars:

You was, the Second Person Plural of the Pronoun placed in agreement with the First or Third Person Singular of the Verb, is an enormous Solecism: and yet Authors of the first rank have inadvertently fallen into it. (Lowth 1762: 48)²

² For the present study, Eighteenth Century Collections Online (ECCO) was made use of to gain access to the eighteenth-century grammars

Lowth's remark above describes the situation of those days very well: the variant *you was* should be stigmatised as is now the case in present-day Standard English, but was rather widespread even among people from the upper class of the society.

The reason why the grammarians were extremely intense in this usage is readily inferred from the fact that *you was* was a brand new trend, which great authors before them had never followed. Previous studies such as Laitinen (2009), Nevalainen (2006) and Tieken-Boon van Ostade (2002) explain the ebb and flow of this trend: Scarcely was the stigmatised form *you was* used in the seventeenth century, came into use and became proliferated at the turn of the eighteenth century, but waned from the peak in the middle of the century onwards until evicted from Standard English.

5.2. Voltaire's letters

The period of Voltaire's English letters spans the years 1726 to 1773, when the ephemeral variant *you was* was most flourishing. His acquisition of the English language preceded the publication of Lowth's grammar. The assumption, then, is that Voltaire uses the singular verbal form for the singular pronoun as well as the plural verbal form. The result is rather surprising in that he never employs *you were*, while four instances of *you was* are found, as in examples (7-10).

- (7) But I must did adieu to the great town of Constantin, and stay in my little corner of the world, in that very same castle, where ***you was*** invited to come in yr way to Paris in case you should have taken the road of Calais to Marseilles. (Letter of 22 February 1736 to Sir Everard Fawkener)
- (8) By the god of friendship if ***you was*** to stay one month longer in Flanders, j would post away from Paris to see you. (Letter of 21 October 1745 to Sir Everard Fawkener)
- (9) ***You was*** beneficent to mr Thompson, when he Liv'd, and you is so to me in favouring me with his works. (Letter of 17 May 1750 to George Lyttelton)
- (10) I return you with many thanks the gloomy but noble copy of verse ***you was*** pleased to lend me for some days. (Letter of 10 December 1750 to Sir

Examples (7), (9), and (10) demonstrate indicative clauses, and example (8) demonstrates a subjunctive clause. The present tense *you is* is even found in example (9), probably attributable to the parallel structure with the previous clause with *you was*.³ Considering that all the instances postdate his return from England and predate the beginning of the decline of the stigmatised form across the Channel, Voltaire spotted the brand new ephemeral trend towards the use of *you was* during his stay in England, and kept on using the later proscribed form more often than the later prescribed one.

6. Conclusion

The present study has focused on the two linguistic features in Voltaire's letters, the progressive and singular *you was/were*, both of which are in transition in the eighteenth century, although either shows a relatively low frequency in his correspondence. In Section 2, the sequence of events which led to Voltaire's visit to England was briefly described. Section 3 introduced the material examined in this article, that is, 105 letters from Voltaire. Section 4 has shown that Voltaire's fewer use of the progressive was unprogressive at the time, while it was revealed in Section 5 that he caught up with the up-to-date trend in variation of singular *you was/were*. The two linguistic features studied for the present study, are infrequent in Voltaire's letters. However, they both proved to be worthy of examining, indicating characteristics of Voltaire's English.

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³ It is the only occurrence of *you is* in Voltaire's letters while there are tens of instances of *you are*.

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Appendix

Recipients and dates of Voltaire's English letters

No.	Recipient	Date
1	Alexander Pope	4 Oct 1726
2	Nicolas Claude Thieriot	26 Oct 1726
3	Rolland Puchot, comte Des Alleurs	27 May 1727
4	Nicolas Claude Thieriot	27 May 1727
5	Jonathan Swift	16 Jun 1727
6	Jonathan Swift	25 Dec 1727
7	Richard Boyle	c. 1 Jan 1728
8	Edward Harley	c. 1 Jan 1728
9	Richard Towne	? 15 Jan 1728
10	Jonathan Swift	? Mar 1728
11	The Daily Post	31 Mar 1728
12	Rolland Puchot, comte Des Alleurs	11 Apr 1728
13	Nicolas Claude Thieriot	2 May 1728
14	Pierre Desmaizeaux	? Spring 1728
15	Nicolas Claude Thieriot	25 Jun 1728
16	John Brinsden	? Summer 1728
17	Richard Towne	3 Aug 1728
18	Nicolas Claude Thieriot	c. 1 Feb 1729
19	Nicolas Claude Thieriot	25 Mar 1729
20	Nicolas Claude Thieriot	1 Apr 1729
21	Nicolas Claude Thieriot	2 Apr 1729
22	Nicolas Claude Thieriot	7 Apr 1729
23	Charlotte Clayton, Lady Sundon [née Dyve]	18 Apr 1729
24	Nicolas Claude Thieriot	5 Jul 1729
25	Jean François Du Bellay Du Resnel	11 Nov 1729
26	Charles Douglas	c. 1 Dec 1730
27	George Bubb Dodington, Baron Melcombe	? 15 Jan 1732
28	John Hervey	? 15 Jan 1732
29	Charles Lennox	? 15 Jan 1732
30	Nicolas Claude Thieriot	14 Apr 1732
31	Nicolas Claude Thieriot	13 May 1732
32	Nicolas Claude Thieriot	26 May 1732
33	Charles Lennox	8 Jul 1732
34	Nicolas Claude Thieriot	9 Jul 1732
35	Andrew Pitt	? end Dec 1732
36	Nicolas Claude Thieriot	24 Feb 1733

37	Nicolas Claude Thieriot	27 Jul 1733
38	John Hervey	14 Sept 1733
39	Nicolas Claude Thieriot	? 15 Nov 1734
40	Nicolas Claude Thieriot	? 15 Jan 1735
41	Jean François Du Bellay Du Resnel	? 15 Apr 1735
42	Sir Everard Fawkener	18 Sept 1735
43	Nicolas Claude Thieriot	c. 25 Nov 1735
44	Nicolas Claude Thieriot	22 Jan 1736
45	Sir Everard Fawkener	22 Feb 1736
46	Mme — Prault [née unknown]	30 Aug 1736
47	Nicolas Claude Thieriot	14 Aug 1738
48	Claude Adrien Helvétius	2 May 1739
49	Martin Folkes [ffolkes]	10 Oct 1739
50	Robert Smith	10 Oct 1739
51	Sir Everard Fawkener	2 Mar 1740
52	Sir Everard Fawkener	c. 15 Jun 1742
53	Martin Folkes [ffolkes]	25 Nov 1743
54	Sir Everard Fawkener	1 Oct 1745
55	Sir Everard Fawkener	21 Oct 1745
56	Jean Bernard Le Blanc, abbé Le Blanc	17 Jan 1746
57	Sir Everard Fawkener	13 Jun 1746
58	Sir Everard Fawkener	8 Sept 1746
59	Sir Everard Fawkener	5 Nov 1748
60	Sir Everard Fawkener	29 Mar 1749
61	Sir Everard Fawkener	15 Nov 1749
62	George Lyttelton	17 May 1750
63	Richard Rolt	1 Aug 1750
64	Sir Charles Hanbury Williams	c. 10 Dec 1750
65	Sir Everard Fawkener	27 Jul 1751
66	Richard Rolt	3 Aug 1751
67	Sir Everard Fawkener	27 Nov 1751
68	Sir Everard Fawkener	24 Jan 1752
69	Sir Everard Fawkener	27 Mar 1752
70	Sir Everard Fawkener	2 May 1752
71	Sir Everard Fawkener	28 Nov 1752
72	Sir Everard Fawkener	16 Jan 1753
73	Sir Charles Hanbury Williams	? 16 Jan 1753
74	Sir Everard Fawkener	1 Feb 1753
75	Sir Everard Fawkener	23 Dec 1753

76	George Bubb Dodington, Baron Melcombe	4 Feb 1756
77	George Keate	? Nov/Dec 1756
78	George Keate	? Nov/Dec 1756
79	George Keate	? Nov/Dec 1756
80	George Keate	c. 14 Dec 1756
81	Jacob Vernes	c. 10 Dec 1757
82	Jean Alphonse Rosset de Rochefort	11 Feb 1759
83	Jean Alphonse Rosset de Rochefort	16 Feb 1759
84	George Keate	27 Jul 1759
85	Mr — Smith	29 Sept 1759
86	George Keate	16 Jan 1760
87	George Keate	30 Jun 1760
88	Henry Fox	28 Apr 1761
89	John Stuart	19 Jul 1761
90	George Lyttelton	19 Jul 1761
91	William Pitt	19 Jul 1761
92	Henry Fox	25 Jul 1761
93	Philip Dormer Stanhope	5 Aug 1761
94	Hans Stanley	? 15 Aug 1761
95	George Keate	8 Jul 1762
96	Jean Le Rond d'Alembert	29 Mar 1762
97	George Keate	? 13 Oct 1762
98	Arthur Hill-Trevor	8 Mar 1764
99	Arthur Hill-Trevor	13 Mar 1764
100	Paul Vaillant	14 Oct 1764
101	<i>The Monthly Review</i>	14 Oct 1764
102	John Wilkes	c. 25 Nov 1764
103	James Boswell	25 Dec 1764
104	James Boswell	11 Feb 1765
105	George Keate	27 Aug 1773
